

Talent identification and development

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Valorization addendum

According to top executives and HR managers, talented workers are one of the scarcest resources today. They fear that they will not be able to fill key leading positions in their firms in the upcoming years. While the search for talent has always been a major concern, recent developments in the labor market have intensified the 'war for talent'. The ageing population and rapid change of skills required for today's jobs leave the firms with an, on average, less talented pool of employees. This increases the need for a timely and correct identification of talented workers who can keep up with the requirements of their job profile, but also to develop that talent further in accordance with future demands of the job.

The four studies in my dissertation provide new, structural insights that can help firms to rethink and improve their talent identification and development practices. More specifically, the first three studies give guidance on how to identify effective supervisors and how their own talent and that of their subordinates can be fostered, while the last study reveals potential pitfalls of a designated talent identification program in general.

As about 70% of firms have implemented a mentoring or supervision program, the potential audience of my findings is relatively large. While interpersonal skills are a clear selection criterion for receiving the supervisory role, the positive influence of supervisors on subordinates confirms that it is also likely to be one of the most relevant criteria to let employees advance to this position. Therefore, to make an appropriate choice from the pool of supervisor candidates, HR managers can include this criterion in their identification process.

However, the second study also implies that only relying on interpersonal skills to become a good supervisor is not sufficient. HR and talent management has to closely monitor the supervisor's own job performance, as well as the way supervisors provide ratings and the accompanying feedback to their subordinates. Unconscious biases, but also sometimes personal motives as shown in study three, might lead to behavior that is not beneficial for the development of the subordinates. Given that supervisors are often to a large part responsible for the dissemination of (firm-specific) knowledge to their subordinates, firms clearly have an incentive to observe the effectiveness of their supervision program. That is, if supervisors fall short of these supervision skills, the subordinate will not gain as much from the supervisor-supervisee relationship as intended, which, in the worst case, lowers the subordinate's career perspective. Therefore, firms can consider those factors as early warning signals that might require an intervention regarding their supervision skills.

At the same time, the results are also of particular interest for supervisors and supervisees themselves. When an employee has the aspiration to grow into the role of a supervisor, the findings indicate that the promotion committee will most likely direct its attention towards social and interpersonal skills. Hence, the supervisor candidate has to invest in order to achieve a certain level of these skills to be considered as potential supervisor, and help raise the next generation of employees. Furthermore, my results provide the supervisors with evidence that they should not underestimate the value of honest and constructive feedback. While this statement in itself sounds trivial, research

has shown that rater and feedback providers are still largely biased, often unconsciously. Therefore, the findings of my second study should motivate them to rethink their performance evaluation skills and address any areas for improvement, especially when they want to move up further the hierarchy as suggested by the results of the third study. From the perspectives of supervisees, the studies of this dissertation provide them with insights into the conditions under which they can expect a higher benefit from the supervision program. More importantly, this implies that if they recognize a lack of such development-supporting conditions, they can actively contribute to the improvement of their situation by consulting their supervisor and HR department.

Moving to the general identification of employee talent, we observe a growing trend towards programs and processes that specifically take the potential of employees into account in order to match it with the requirements of their future jobs. Therefore, the fourth study is one of the first that evaluates the effectiveness of such a program. Yet, the results indicate that the matching of employee talent with future jobs does not always work out in the intended way, resulting in a performance drop instead of an increase. Hence, before making an assessment of the employee's potential regarding the requirements for the next job, the firms first have to establish which knowledge and skills do actually drive performance at certain hierarchical positions in the firm. Only after identifying a reliable way to measure that knowledge and skills, a clear competency profile for the next job can be created, and be compared to the employee's potential to perform well at that job. It also becomes clear that a “one size fits it all solution” cannot be applied to every firm, and the benefits of such a talent identification program should outweigh its implementation costs.

From a more macroeconomic perspective, the findings of my study can support a more efficient process of assigning talent to the right occupation (at least within the professional service sector, which constitutes an increasing part of the economy), leading eventually to lower costs thereof. For example, firms that rely heavily on close supervisor-supervisee interaction can intensify their efforts to sort at the gate by assessing the interpersonal skills of job candidates. This increases the likelihood that the right people are matched earlier into an environment where their skills and knowledge are required and the utilization thereof can be maximized, reducing the need and costs for switching occupations.

To summarize, the studies of this dissertation provide insights to individuals, firms, but also policy makers on how the problem regarding a shrinking pool of talent can be partially reduced by applying the right talent identification and development practices.

